

West Seattle Branch Library

Seattle Planning Commissioner: Valerie Kinast

Facilitator: Donna Morse, DPD

Note Taker: Katie Sheehy, DPD

Attendees:

- Architect, Pres. W. Seattle Community Council, on Design Review Board
 - Housing Development Consortium
 - Planner and Landscape Architect; Beacon Hill Council design guidelines
 - West Seattle Junction, City Neighborhood Council
 - Sec. of Morgan Junction neighborhood association, Pres. of condo association
 - Property manager/owner, Delridge Valley neighborhood development association
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1. “What is the nature of new development in/near your neighborhood? Are a variety of housing types being built or are they all similar?”

We’re mostly seeing new condos in the Junction, more than apartments. It’s often hard to distinguish them from townhouses that are for sale.

Construction costs are so high that people can’t really afford to buy what is being built.

There are some smaller infill projects 3 or 4 houses with a backyard or a 4-plex. There is a row of them on Fountleroy.

There is a mix of zoning on Beacon Hill so we’re seeing some duplexes and infill in L-1 zones, not too much lot consolidation. We are expecting to see more new mixed use with the coming light rail.

Delridge is seeing a panoply of growth. Everything from mixed use to low income condominiums above our new library. Some projects comply with our plan, others don’t. Arterial streets are the only way to get around, but often those get so congested that people start using residential streets too. The City needs to find a way to create more controllable density. Right now affordable means spending \$240-300K for new construction. We’re also seeing townhouses where people can barely get their car into the garage. There is also a problem between the balance of jobs and retail mixture because not everyone can afford to live within a close proximity to where they work. There is also a lot of pressure on affordable housing that protects the door-to-door diversity of neighborhoods. We’re seeing a lot of gentrification, particularly with the new townhouses and more are still being sold.

We’ve got the food bank and mixed use at 35th and Morgan. The new units at High Point. In Morgan Junction at 42nd and Alaska there is a new mixed use building with a grocery store.

There are three co-housing areas and four CHHIP projects in my area that are managed for lower income.

The demand is so strong everywhere that developers are building what the zoning allows. The result is a maximization of zoning and units are cramped onto a site so that people can barely fit their cars into their garages.

Design Review attempts to get better projects with different tradeoffs between the community and developers.

2. “Are the zones that we have the right ones or are there too many?”

I don’t think so, there are too many different parts of the city that have different needs. We don’t want to see a one-size fits all approach like the Neighborhood Business District Strategy. We want to encourage variable growth that reflects neighborhood character, not just let the market dictate what happens.

The monorail will really have a tremendous impact on what will happen.

Is there any discussion about the possibility of moving toward performance based-zoning? It’s based on what would best suit the land and could allow for more design flexibility.

We’re just starting to review the MF land use code, so that is good feedback for DPD to consider.

Maybe have a mix of performance-based zoning, but then I would wonder about staff’s ability to make good decisions, especially in the crossover between residential and commercial areas.

The zoning is not too bad because it gives you a breakdown between neighborhood commercial and single-family areas. There needs to be a look at how to transition from HUB urban villages out to single-family areas. The [neighborhood] plan says to preserve single-family, but how do you preserve the balance.

At the time it was voted on, no one ever thought the monorail would create so much pressure to develop. How come departments didn’t integrate these efforts and approach it more holistically?

Another question is about how design guidelines will impact places when new development takes place. In particular, how will these new projects address issues about traffic impacts and parking?

There is fear that economic pressures will limit cultural diversity. No one is against affordable housing, the question is more about the quality of design and what works well within the existing neighborhood. I’m not sure if it’s a code-related issue or needs to be addressed through design review.

The Design Review board in West Seattle is pretty good. A lot of zoning has a tendency to encourage bad projects. The board will often make recommendations for what a project needs to do to fit within the context of the neighborhood that get lost within the planning review process.

3. “What about new development is contributing positively to neighborhoods and what is not?”

The question is about how it all blends together. New development, like the West Seattle Precinct is an example. Traffic is part of our neighborhood plan that isn’t addressed enough. We always

hear more about projects that focus on increasing density, but we need to address how to increase density correctly. Increased density just increases neighborhood stress, e.g. crime. People need breathing spaces, plans for traffic, building setbacks. There is no other way to expand the right-of-way for more cars. If there is ever an emergency that would require an evacuation of West Seattle, it will be impossible to move traffic through quickly. It is going to hit the fan when people realize what is going on in terms of the increased density that isn't being supported by the infrastructure. [Neighborhood planning] Groups have really stuck to their guns. West Seattle is seen as a place that is more affordable and already has a lot of density.

There is a range of affordability that makes Urban Villages more dynamic. California Avenue was like a mini-Aurora, which still has a lot of empty storefronts. Concentrating density within the Urban Village makes them more dynamic. If you dump a lot of stuff on one block, you really need to think about how traffic and parking are going to impact the surrounding area, which is why everyone is concerned. Each individual project might not have a significant impact, but when you add them all together, it really makes a difference.

During the neighborhood planning process, we had to identify changes that would occur and address the necessary capacity within the capital facilities of this area. If this effort [MF code simplification] changes the allowable densities or changes what could happen in our area, then the City also needs to re-evaluate our capacity to accommodate these changes. Most new development has been okay so far, but some new buildings are just really ugly. We need to think about what level of zoning really needs to be evaluated. There are big issues around parking because a lot of people have more than one car and when we transition into a less auto-dependent area, we need to take that into consideration. I think the zones are okay now. Different neighborhoods have different trends. Zoning should be more flexible based on neighborhood needs.

A really important question is "where is everyone going to park?"

Current zoning should allow people to collectively construct parking that different businesses could share.

Practically everyone [household] has two cars, but not everyone has one.

It's premature for the social engineers to push us away from using our cars.

We'd like to see eased regulations for businesses that serve people who walk there, like grocery stores. We wanted a grocery store in our area but got a Home Depot. Delridge people have to drive to a grocery store because none are within walking distance, which pushes traffic along smaller streets. We would like to see more small stores that people can walk to.

The area will change somewhat when High Point is complete. There are rumors that it will have affordable housing, but I don't believe it.

The typical NIMBY response to projects is always about traffic and maybe people (urban planners) just start to ignore their concerns. Maybe there should be some sort of meter to measure actual traffic impacts to show that it really is a problem.

Outside of the city you can see really good examples of how everything gets funneled into smaller and smaller areas.

Someone should really evaluate and have a theoretical rationale for the parking requirements.

Instead of waiting until projects are built and then constructing roads, we need to build more roads to serve the anticipated projects.

The City should build on the monorail study that looked at traffic lights and capacities and build on that.

We really need to make sure that we have built an infrastructure that supports the increased density the City expects our neighborhoods to absorb.

We'll have to change what you permit because we'll need to cope with the crocodile arterials.

Occasional bus use doesn't change much with income, but where people are in multi-family areas, they do use the bus more. Transit is as important as traffic.

Traffic is definitely a critical component of multifamily areas.

Accessory dwelling units are something the City should really think long and hard about. It shouldn't be allowed in single-family zones but it is important to have them in the neighborhood.

Cottage housing seems like a good idea, but again it really matters where it's located.

The problem with cottage housing is that they don't pencil out. The cost of land is just too high to make those projects work in terms of what it cost to build that type of house relative to what you can actually sell it for.

Can't we put them in multifamily areas so that single-family areas are protected?

But it just isn't financially feasible. Affordable housing in general isn't something that developers can afford to build.

Many detached dwelling units are sub-standard anyway. It's the Southern California syndrome. There needs to be protection for the health and safety of people. It's a question of rental affordability. There is no economic base that allows people to live and work in the same area.

The issue is still about economics. What is the price of the land? Townhouses or apartments don't make the land any cheaper.

Even apartments aren't affordable for some segments of the population.

A lot of affordable apartments are being converted into condos, which then makes them unaffordable.

Some developers can afford to build affordable housing with the right subsidies.

Seattle Housing Authority used to have property everywhere, which is a good way to have a mix of people in neighborhoods.

There is a land trust where SHA keeps units running at cost rather than market rates.

But that's not exactly what happens. There is a 95-unit property that they own and only 55 of the units are occupied now. It always used to rent at capacity. What ever their strategy, it doesn't really help affordability. New Holly and High Point are both just doing away with areas that have a diversity of incomes.

Maybe there need to be more benefits and incentives for developers to build housing that is affordable to lower income households.

What can you do for developers to make it worth their while to build a few affordable units is their projects?

Enforcement of the existing affordable housing stock is important too.

Yes, but how can you also increase the number of units?

Affordable housing is more apt to work when it's done by non-profits because there is more of incentive for them to create mixed income buildings, but people don't want to live together. Someone doesn't want to see the lower income cars parked in their garage.

How will they enforce the affordable housing that is supposed to be constructed at High Point?

The areas are designed so that each is specialized for different people, for different incomes.

The market plays a big role in what makes housing affordable.

And the allowable density...

Underground parking is definitely a priority in our neighborhood.

It its not affordable for a developer to build a project, then you have to go to DNBA. Construction costs have really skyrocketed in recent years.

We choose materials very carefully to make it affordable because people get sticker shock when they have to pay \$125/sf for a condo or \$200/sf for a house.

4. "What types of affordable housing are most needed in your neighborhood?"

Mobile homes could maybe be a more affordable housing option. Well, manufactured homes was what I meant. After WWII, things were simple and people were happy with smaller, more functional houses. Maybe we've gotten too fancy.

There is some tradeoff in terms of which way the pendulum is swinging and what sort of housing people want to live in.

We've learned a lot since WWII. What can we use to create affordable housing now? It's not going to be your grandfather's type of affordable housing. We have learned enough that we should be able to find a solution to this.

I grew up in a three-bedroom house with one bathroom. Houses just aren't built that way anymore. There aren't anymore 800-1200sf basic houses for a lot of people. They just don't exist. It's about half the size of places that are being constructed now, which are 1200-1500 sf.

What I'm saying is that we've left the bottom end out; we're not constructing that type of housing anymore.

Developers don't get it yet. Maybe the market is there for smaller houses, but they're just not willing to build it yet.

If you can get 12 units, at a cost of \$100-\$125/sf, are you going to sell them at \$300K or \$200K

But some developers do have more of a conscious than that and would sell the home at \$200K.

Since I've moved here with my family, we started renting apartments, so that's where we live too. We talk to our kids about it, especially because their friends live in bigger places. When my daughter and some of her classmates visited Russia, they stayed in Stalin-era apartments. My daughter did really well there but a lot of other students didn't because they were used to more space. Trends in Tokyo are even more extreme where businessmen just want a place to sleep and store their stuff. Even in NYC people are happy to live in much smaller places.

We had that opportunity to create that kind of density in Belltown, but the developers wouldn't touch it because they want to make the most profits.

In 10 years, gas could be \$10/gallon. The Market will drive and build to what people can afford. Timberland mobile homes has started hiring my firm to design more affordable houses that fit the \$200-300 price range. There is no reason that price can't drop.

Something really has to force that change though.

The City can disperse affordability as much as possible. Clustering it is not good. The City can say what they want, but it's throughout neighborhoods and codes that really allow affordable housing. Banks that loan the money give benefits to developers. We need to start thinking of the long-term. The City's focus should be about how we set in place neighborhood-by-neighborhood priorities.

4500 homeless housing units are needed, but there is not a lot of money to construct and manage them. Boarding houses [SRO] might be good, but the current zoning doesn't allow that. Dormitory-style housing could also accommodate affordable housing, but it doesn't get built.

They've been doing that a while in Delridge. I actually heard one of the developers say "we're building these to market to them Asian." They are multi-generational housing units, but it also increases the number of cars. We also need to construct more concrete and intentional housing.

We should also start creating accommodations where homeless people are already.

Can zoning do something for long-term operational costs of housing? LEED certification, or at least building to LEED standards could help reduce long-term maintenance costs.

Public transportation is also a really big issue that is an important factor.

LEED should be the way we design our buildings, but the certification process is really expensive.

But other developers just want to make a huge profit and they don't care about the long-term management of the building. They're just going to sell it anyway.

Building codes already require buildings that are basically equal to LEED standards.

5. "What factors do you believe most influence housing affordability? How are these factors addressed or influenced by Land Use Code requirements?"

Not addressed.

6. "In your opinion, what types of development are proven to be most affordable (and for whom?) and does the zoning accommodate this type of development?"

Not addressed.

7. "What about the multifamily code requirements are hard to understand or may not produce the intended or desired results?"

It's not so much that the codes are hard to understand, it's that developers always find loopholes and they don't follow the intent of the code.

The codes aren't hard to understand.

Successful cities ask what makes it too expensive to have developers get what they want.

There aren't any gray areas.

It's a question of whether we want a proactive code or a reactive one.

As resources dwindle, they look at other ways to increase revenue. An effective code change would ask what is it that is cost ineffective about the building process.

What takes time during the permitting process is the sheer volume. DPD does a good job, but they would have to double their staff to accommodate the code and all the new construction. It's not that the staff doesn't understand the code, it just takes time. I would like to see more give and take that would allow increased density if developers do something for it, like the negotiation that can occur during design review.

We really need to see a shift in the collective will around affordability. The current administration is pro-development, but I'm not sure that mindset will prevail in the long run. A leader needs to emerge that will focus on affordable housing. The average person can no longer afford to live here and someone who has the voice to express that will create the necessary shift.

8. "The Comprehensive Plan and many neighborhood plans call for a mix of housing types. How do you think we can achieve a mix of housing types? Do you think the Land Use Code allows for this?"

Not addressed.

9. "How can we encourage good design?"

It's a question of prescriptive set of rigid zones versus increasing the flexibility within the zoning code.

We need a good PR campaign to show that good design doesn't have to cost more than bad design and that it can help a project sell or lease up more quickly.

You'd have to track that on multiple levels because there are so many factors that go into why a project leases or sells.

We need to focus on our neighborhood plans and create a concentration that stays together. If you have a crappy neighborhood, you won't get the sort of people that you'd like to live there.

Multifamily housing that has some sort of eventual ownership program would help. Non—profit, participatory ownership usually helps address issues of design and also creates a sense of ownership that improves design.

Multifamily right of ways also need to be addressed so that we can still accommodate more traffic in the future.

We should give Design Review the ability to allow departures that DPD actually enforces and give developers an incentive to design good buildings.

In the neighborhoods, we can sit down with developers and get better projects by cooperating with them during Design Review.

To encourage good design, you can't create stifle creativity. Design guidelines can also be helpful.